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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 BRASILIA 003236

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: BRAZIL VICE PRESIDENT JOSE ALENCAR'S PROBLEMATICO PERFORMANCE

REF: A. A. BRASILIA 3125

[B. B. BRASILIA 02473](#)

[¶1.](#) (SBU) Summary. Unlike in the U.S., Brazil's Vice President assumes control when the chief executive travels abroad. Current VP Jose Alencar usually keeps a low profile in that capacity, but his underwhelming performance during President Lula da Silva's recent trip to New York to open the UNGA has raised questions about Alencar's suitability for the number two executive branch job. End Summary.

Alencar's Signature Moment

[¶2.](#) (SBU) During Brazilian President Lula's recent international travel, Vice President Jose Alencar's procrastination in signing a controversial decree legalizing the planting and sales of genetically-modified soybeans generated considerable media attention (ref A). A few commentators allowed that the President should not have left Alencar holding the bag on such a contentious issue, but the incident nonetheless raised doubts about Alencar's capabilities. Alencar had been relatively quiet over the last few months after he stirred debate in June by criticizing publicly the Central Bank's interest rate policies. Unlike the interest rate flap, however, few believe that Alencar's recent wobbling on biotech soybeans was a gambit to allow the GoB to air opposing views (as a business contact asserted to Sao Paulo ConGen recently) or legitimate commentary within Alencar's area of expertise. Indeed, during a meeting on GMOs with a U.S. Codel, Alencar appeared uninformed about the issue (ref B).

[¶3.](#) (SBU) The opposition is also making some political hay out of Alencar's performance. The 1988 Brazilian Constitution directs the Vice President to assume the duties of chief executive when the President travels abroad. According to press reports, PDT Senator Jefferson Peres has used Alencar's GMO stutter-step to reinvigorate a push for an amendment that would modify the VP's powers. (Note. It is unlikely that Peres can muster the 3/5 majority needed to pass an amendment as the administration is opposed to the proposal. End note.)

Views of a Predecessor

[¶4.](#) (SBU) In the wake of the June interest rate flap, President Cardoso's (1994-2002) Vice President Marco Maciel, a Senator from Pernambuco, told Poloff that occasional contretemps between the VP and the President are predictable but manageable. Maciel, who served 339 days as Acting President, noted that the running mate is often selected to provide geographic or ideological (i.e. party) balance, which can lead to policy disconnects. The discreet Maciel got along well with President Cardoso, but the VP-President relationship has often been rocky in Brazilian history. In the case of Alencar, Maciel asserted that a relative lack of political experience undermines his performance. After a very successful career as a clothing exporter, Alencar entered politics with an unsuccessful 1994 gubernatorial bid in Minas Gerais before serving one senate term. Maciel said Alencar's inexperience also makes it harder to craft a suitable "special mission" for him as provided by the Constitution.

[¶5.](#) (SBU) Maciel does not believe that efforts to reform the vice presidency would make much progress unless tied to a much larger political reform package. He noted that most Brazilian politicians believe that the inordinate number of times a Vice President has come to power in Brazil in the last 50 years (four, not counting the several temporary assumptions of the Presidency due to health reasons during the 21-year military regime) necessitates having an elected Vice President who is given some opportunity to serve as the number one.

Comment

[¶6.](#) (SBU) Alencar will have ample opportunity to improve his performance as Acting President. If Lula maintains his current pace of foreign travel, the 72 year-old Alencar could wear the presidential sash for over 200 days this term.

While Alencar has managed to become part of the story in two controversial domestic issues, he has not abused his authority. At the end of the day, he signed the soybean decree as the President instructed. Moreover, the Vice President has not been a factor in other hot button issues, such as tax and pension reforms, suggesting any future intrusions onto center-stage will be accidental. Alencar's most important contribution continues to be as an intermediary between the business community and the Workers' Party-dominated administration.

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